

Investigative Storage:

Is there a Powder Keg in Your Back Yard?

In October, 1987, a fire department arson investigator entered a shared outdoor evidence room used by both the police and fire departments. He needed to photograph a five-gallon gas can used in a recent fire. The evidence room was a cement-walled

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eight-foot-by-eight-foot-by-four-foot structure attached to the police building. It was designed for storage of

A haz mat incident, waiting to happen?

flammable liquid evidence from arson cases as well as gasoline siphoning arrests and similar crimes. The investigator entered the room to find it filled almost to capacity.

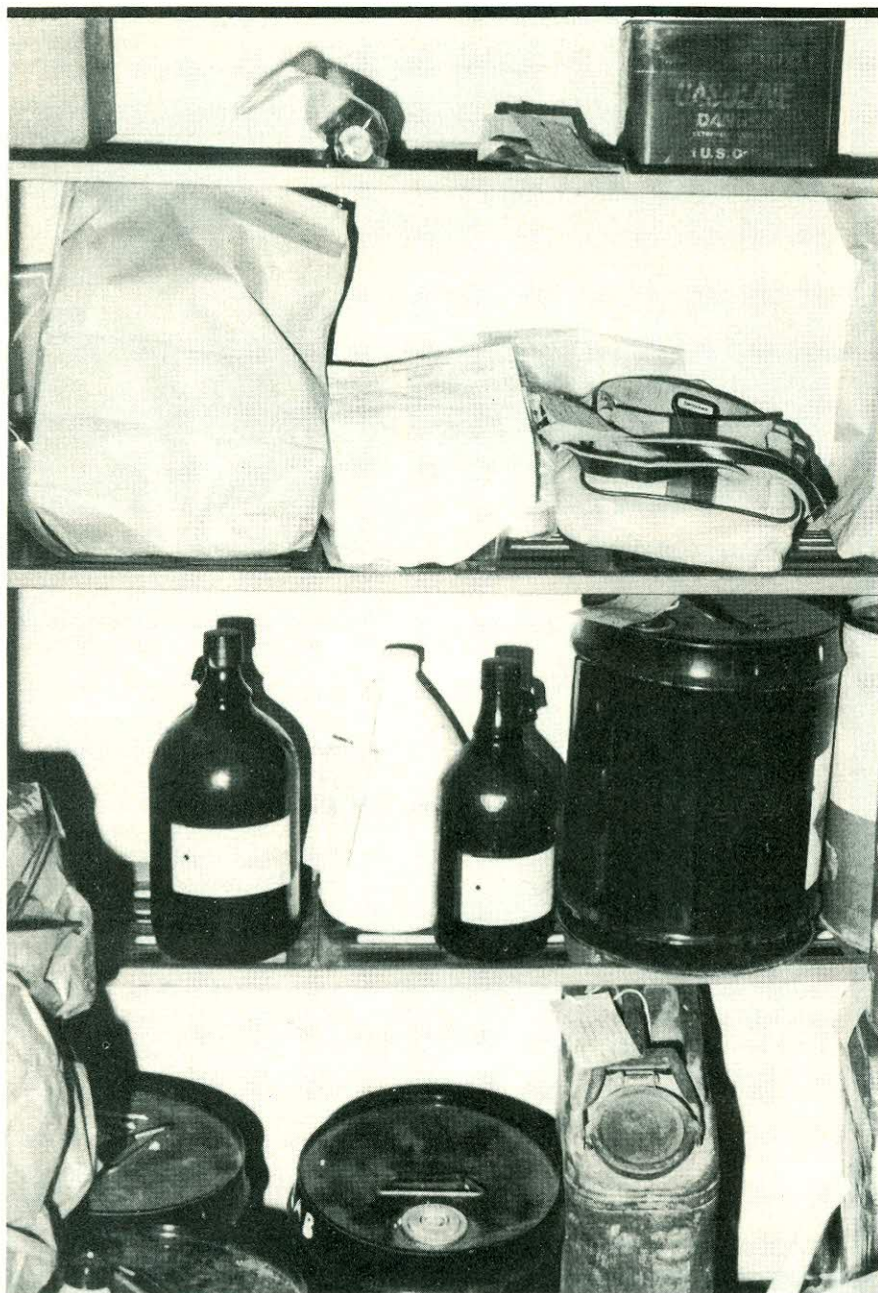
To free the gas can needed for photographs, many other items had to be moved. Among these items were tear gas canisters, training-type smoke grenades, miscellaneous fireworks, unmarked/tagged one-gallon glass jugs containing liquids and several bottles on their sides and leaking. (The overturned bottles were possibly upset by last October's earthquake.) An additional one-gallon jug was found overturned on a top shelf and was labeled "ether."

Leakage from some of the smaller bottles and cans containing a large amount of seized narcotic manufacturing hardware, glassware, chemicals in powdered and crystallized state and numerous unmarked glass jars not only obliterated several labels, but had also deteriorated their cardboard boxes significantly enough to make them unusable to move the items.

The investigator mitigated the problem sufficiently enough to obtain his photographs for court by repackaging the narcotic evidence in new cardboard boxes and repositioning the overturned jugs to lower shelves.

Later the same day, he returned to the evidence room to further evaluate the problem. He brought along a Haz Mat specialist to help identify some of the items and their potential haz-

Does your department store evidence for narcotics, arson or other cases involving hazardous substances or share storage area with the police department? If so, you may have a potential haz mat incident in your own back yard. Formulating a storage policy and reorganizing your evidence area may save you a lot of grief later.



Photos courtesy of Glendale Police Dept. Lab

ardous properties. They immediately noticed that the evidence labels showed many of the items to be anywhere from several months to over one year old. This was true not only of the narcotic evidence, but the arson evidence as well.

Over 11 gallons of gasoline and other flammable liquids were also stored in the room. Several glass containers contained gasoline and were stored on high shelves. These were Molotov cocktails that were booked in as they were seized and not secured any further. There was an overpowering smell of gasoline in the small room. It was well ventilated, but any type of spark could have created a disaster. The room was attached to the side of the police building next to the jail.

The primary problems noted were:

1. Improper/poor packaging of evidence when booked by officers and investigators
2. Placement/security on shelves



Shelves without lips or a wire strung across may be risking a fall.

3. Unknown shelf-life and stability of items
4. Mixing of explosives, incendiaries and fireworks with flammable liquids

Further research revealed that the evidence room was affectionately known as the "Flammable/hazardous material/explosive/unknown Material Property Room" among personnel. Basically, anything deemed unsafe to book in to the main indoor property room was relegated to the outdoor facility without any screening and left. No written guidelines were ever drawn up to deal with the storage facility.

Calls to several other nearby agencies showed similar situations and that no written guidelines existed. The situation was almost serious enough to be considered a full-blown hazard-

ous materials incident.

A quick check of police files showed that the majority of the evidence stored was no longer needed for court or any other purposes. Either the case had already been adjudicated or the seized/stored items could have been sampled, analyzed and photographed for court presentation. About 50 percent of the narcotic evidence was not needed for court since the arrest was for possession of the controlled substance and not manufacturing. Thus, the miscellaneous contraband was free for disposition.

A commercial Haz Mat disposal firm was contracted. It quickly responded to transport the hazardous and unknown items. The expense was sizable (over \$2,000) but absolutely necessary. The explosive, incendiary and pyrotechnic items were picked up by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Bomb Squad and the California State Fire Marshal's Office for disposition.



Unlabeled, damaged boxes may contain reactive substances.

To alleviate the on-going problem of this storeroom, training was obtained through the L.A. County Sheriff's Department HazMat Unit. The HazMat Unit provided the Vice/Narcotics Unit with resources for commercially-available narcotic evidence booking kits and instructions in their use. It also outlined court-acceptable procedures that allow sampling of evidence, thus freeing the larger portion of the contraband for immediate disposal. This saves time, money and space in the storeroom as well as lessening the potential storage hazards.

As a result of this experience, these two agencies met and developed guidelines for investigators, police officers booking evidence and prop-

erty room personnel. Areas addressed and their resolve is listed below:

PACKAGING

The majority of the narcotic evidence was flammable/explosive ethers and acids. Other chemicals associated with narcotic manufacture/use are too numerous to mention, but have flammable/explosive/hazardous properties. These items must be identified or isolated by category first, before packaging and storage. If possible or necessary, take only a sample of the contraband booked in as evidence. Courts recognize the hazardous nature of this type of evidence and will readily accept photographs and analysis to solidify a case.

In narcotic manufacturing cases, the type of container, size and content appearance will usually suffice to isolate the type of chemical. They can then, if necessary, safely be stored in the original container. If glass, they must be secured on the shelves. (See

Placement/security.) Again, sampling would be ideal.

Cases involving arrests for the end-product of narcotic manufacturing can also be dealt with by sampling, but storage and disposal techniques may differ. Some narcotics can be hazardous if breathed or placed in contact with the skin. Check with local Haz Mat specialists when dealing with this type of material.

The fire department or health department Haz Mat unit can assist with on-site seizures and arrest situations by pre-arrangement. Their on-site identification capabilities will not only assist investigators with proper criminal charging sections, but will also immediately screen out items that are

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INVESTIGATE . . .

not needed and can be disposed of quickly. It also, of course, helps protect the narcotic investigators from prolonged exposure during transportation. Again, this enables the agency to save space in the storage facility. Commercially-available narcotic evidence booking kits should be used for narcotic evidence. When possible, photograph the evidence.

Flammable liquid evidence such as gasoline, charcoal lighter fluid and camping fuels are similar in their storage dangers. Although not as potentially hazardous to health as narcotics evidence, they are explosive. Large amounts should not be stored.

Appearance, container configuration and smell will isolate the type of product and, again, sampling is recommended. Photograph the evidence and retain the container only if necessary. Five gallons of gasoline seized in a siphoning case take up a great deal of room, so simply sample it and dispose of it in an appropriate manner, as quickly as possible. Samples of flammable liquids should be placed in evidence jars, and then sealed inside clean paint cans for added security.

STORAGE PLACEMENT/ SECURITY

Glass containers should be stored on the lowest shelves or floor only, separated from each other to prevent breakage through mishandling, earthquake or weather damage. Each shelf should have a lip, or a wire stretching across it to keep items from upsetting or falling off the shelf. These simple modifications can prevent contamination of the entire storage facility and loss of valuable evidence.



Glass containers don't belong on high shelves.

SHELF LIFE

Many items become unstable and reactive to shock, friction or changes in weather, especially heat. Some, such as ethers and acids, are explosive. Proper packaging will help prolong shelf-life as well as reasonable climate control inside the facility. Cool is preferred.

Routine monthly or weekly inspection of the storeroom should be performed by a trained individual such as a Haz Mat specialist or arson investigator. Signs of aging are failing containers, oozing or condensation of leaking vapors.

TIMELY FOLLOW UP

It should be the individual investigator's responsibility to know when his cases are adjudicated and the evidence is free for disposal. Courts are normally slow in notifying agencies of case outcome. Misdemeanor cases may even be resolved without notifying the agency of ultimate disposition.


A court liaison officer should assist with periodically examining court files in cases involving flammable/hazardous materials and advise when the case is over, thus freeing evidence for disposition. Again, a regularly-scheduled inspection of the facility will identify older cases.

EXPLOSIVES, INCENDIARIES AND FIREWORKS

Under no circumstances should any kind of firework, incendiary material or explosive be stored with flammable or hazardous materials. This includes smoke bombs/grenades and tear gases. Many of these items require flame initiation or are heat/friction/shock sensitive. Regardless of the properties, they are not in any way compatible with flammable liquids. Separate arrangements must be made for their storage.

Some explosives and pyrotechnic materials can be successfully neutralized by immersion in diesel fuel, making them compatible with flammable liquids storage. Check with local bomb squad or military authorities to explore these possibilities.

CONCLUSION

A written, enforceable guideline must be developed by both the police and fire departments to deal with hazardous storage. Separate facilities must be maintained and resources secured to ensure the safe execution of guidelines. In any event, if such a hazardous condition exists, do not hesitate to involve specialists in mitigating the problem. 



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